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Our Strange Guest.

By 

Wm. McDonell,

Author of *Exeter Hall, Etc., Etc.*

DELIGHTFUL SUMMER
READING - CHEAP
AT

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Our Strange Guest.

BY WILLIAM MCDONELL.

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CHAPTER I.

Sunday, December 24th, 1875—
Christmas Eve. This has been a stormy week, snowing and blowing almost every day. Here from our upper windows I can see the whirling snow clouds rush down along the drifted road, and there must be fully three feet deep of snow in our clearance. The tall pines, thickly draped in white, stand up around like mourners, and when the cold wind passes through them, they bend to the rude blast like creatures in adversity. Now and again, as the wintry gale sweeps onward, one might imagine the thousand flakes which fall from the burdened branches, to be almost suddenly whisked into an icy mist, were like the frozen tears of bereaved ones who are sorrowing for the flowers, the once beautiful summer flowers, that lie fading and withering under the vast white pall which seems to cover the whole earth.

Ah, how often I could wish that some shroud, some dense veil, would hide from my memory the faded flowers of my heart, the once glittering gems of hope which have been lost to me forever.

The church bells are ringing a cheering peal to many—yet the sound in the distance comes to me like a deep, melancholy wail. The faint tinkle of sleigh bells is singularly cheerless, yet many persons are no doubt happy while driving to church beneath the dismal sky, which now makes the steeples of Portville look far away, though that village is little more than a mile distant. This is a joyful season to many, to almost all, yet its annual return brings but sadness to us here in our lone home, a fresh consciousness of having been left forlorn forever; and the effort we make to hide this feeling from one another, especially from my mother, only serves as it were to bring back a keener recollection of the past

and the revival of a parting scene which can never be forgotten. As comets come back at stated periods from immense distances bringing brightness, so in every life, as a contrast, there are memories of the long ago which return to bring but gloom. And now, for some dreary time past, before each succeeding year takes its farewell, a shadow falls upon our house and upon our hearts, a deep shade which keeps out the sunlight and hope for the time, and which makes Christmas to us a period of the most painful remembrance.

Let me think—twelve years already gone! Twelve springs, twelve summers, twelve autumns, and nearly twelve winters; almost twelve entire years. How quickly they have passed! What a gloomy gap out of my lifetime. Yet, notwithstanding this bleak flight of successive seasons, it seems only yesterday since my younger brother, John, everybody's favorite, my mother's idol and Anna Strong's betrothed, came in just after tea, dressed in his uniform as sergeant of a company of Canadian volunteers, to tell my father that he had just received a letter from my brother, Thomas, in Rochester, which stated that he had been drafted for service in the Federal army, and that unless he could very soon procure a substitute, or pay about a thousand dollars—this was I think the amount—he would be sent away and have to serve in the army during the war with the South. Nearly three years previous to this my brother Thomas had settled down in Rochester and got married there. He was clerk or assistant in a drug store, and had but lately lost his wife and his only child. We had, of course, greatly sympathized with him in his affliction, but when this fresh and unexpected news came it caused the most painful anxiety to us all. What was to be done? There was but little time to lose. It was entirely out of my father's power to send the required amount. Our little farm, if hurriedly sold, would scarcely bring more than fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars, and to sell it, or mortgage it—

which might be worse—would in all probability soon leave us homeless. My father was greatly troubled; tears streamed down my mother's cheeks, and we all felt in the most unhappy condition. John alone appeared to think the matter of little consequence; in fact he tried to make us believe that he was pleased with the news. He took delight in military exercises and had joined the village volunteer company, and as this was to be a drill night, he was preparing to go out with his rifle when the unwelcome letter was handed to him. He read it again, and then I noticed that for a few moments his lips were compressed. Then he read it aloud to us, affecting indifference as to its purport, and when he saw our startled faces and the sudden grief it brought my mother, he seized her hands and in a laughing manner told her it was just the kind of message he wanted.

"Goodness gracious" he cried, stepping out before us in a comical attitude, "what does it all amount to?—nothing. This kind of thing happens every day now, and is in fact only what we might have expected. We are no worse off than many others. Either Tom or I must go or the money must be paid, that's all there's of it; and to be plain," said he, striking his open palm with his fist, "I wouldn't pay half or even quarter of the money to get clear of the matter. You know that Tom is not as rugged as I am, he is six or seven years older than I, and he has had lots of trouble already, while I have had none. They will, I think, prefer me. I want to see something of the world instead of being kept here forever in this backward place. Besides, you all must believe that this war is nearly over. The Southerners, they say, are making their last splurge: to be sure they have kept up the contest a little longer than was expected; but you'll find it will be over soon, and perhaps if I don't hurry up, I'll be altogether too late: so Christmas and all as it is, I shall be off in the morning."

How particularly animated my good-natured, generous and loving brother

looked as he thus addressed us! There he stood, a noble fellow in full health and vigor, manly and handsome in appearance. His military red coat with blue facings, his belts and straps and bright brass buckles, his well cared for rifle close by, and his sword bayonet by his side—everything so trim— all gave him the smart soldierly bearing of a "regular." I was proud of him at the moment: any good woman might have looked at him with pleasure, and to another pair of eyes, which just now made their appearance, he was particularly attractive. Anna Strong entered the room just as he had finished speaking. Her smile was first directed to him, and then her cheerful look seemed to bring brightness into the apartment. She had just come to remain and spend Christmas with us. She hesitated a little when she noticed our serious faces: even John's face became grave for an instant when he saw her enter; but I ran forward to bid her welcome. My mother left us for a few moments to hide her emotion, and then John, following me, tried to anticipate any unpleasant explanation of ours by telling Anna about the letter he had received, and apparently with the greatest unconcern, making the circumstance of little or no importance.

Anna Strong was considered one of the most clear-headed and intelligent girls in the neighborhood. She and John and I had been schoolfellows. He and she had been, as it is called, "keeping company," for some time, and this resulted in the most tender attachment for each other. Anna as well as my brother seemed to be everybody's favorite; but no other person could value her as he did. Even when the matter was explained by him as being one of so little consequence, she suddenly grew faint and almost dropped into a chair. In a moment he was at her side. Her handsome face became almost suddenly pale. I never saw cheeks blanch so quickly. I never before heard such a faint, pitiful sigh. I never saw lips quiver so with mental emotion, and then she muttered scarcely louder than

a whisper, "My dream, my last night's dreadful dream."

John's lips were compressed again—this was his peculiar symptom when in trouble or great agitation of mind—and now he was evidently suffering from an emotion which he tried to conceal. Poor fellow! I knew his distress was great at the moment, though it was a struggle for him not only to appear calm, but to seem surprised at the deep concern which we all manifested.

"What's all this for?" cried he, endeavoring to infuse a symptom of annoyance into his words. "Anna, I expected more sense from you, but really, you act like a child."

In spite of his attempt to reproach, there was a tenderness in his accent which touched her—it touched us all—she opened her eyes and tried to smile. The effort, faint as it was, only caused a tear to fall on her cheek: it dropped on his hand which lay on her shoulder, and, as quickly as he saw this fresh evidence of her affectionate heart, he turned from her and looked appealingly at me, and then I saw that his own eyes, like mine, were filled with tears.

He hurriedly left the room, but soon returned, followed by my mother. He had resumed his apparent unconcern and came in smilingly. "Now," said he, turning towards where Anna was sitting, "this is Christmas time, when, according to the good old custom, all should be joyful. Let us have a merry night of it. What's the use in borrowing trouble. Let us tell stories, sing songs, and have a dance if you like—yes, we must have a dance. You can play," pointing to me, "Anna can play, and when you get tired of the piano, I can follow up and scrape a tune or two on the violin. That's it," said he snapping his fingers gleefully, "let us have a dance and don't bother yourself about dreams or predictions, everything will be all right."

"But my dear," said my mother, "if you are determined to leave us early tomorrow you should go to bed and have a good night's rest."

'I won't have time to sleep much

to-night," he replied. "I must leave here at four in the morning to reach Toronto for the early train. I shall have all day to-morrow to rest in the car. It may be a month or two before we meet again, so let us make the most of the time we have, and be merry."

My mother expressed a hope that some arrangement could be made when he got to Rochester so as to get his brother free from liability to service in the Federal army, and that he and Thomas might return together. My father, too, had hopes in the same direction, and stated his intention of accompanying John as far as Rochester. John made no objection to this, and, under the circumstances, we tried to feel content that they should leave together, hoping for the best.

Shortly after this John went out, in order to see the captain of his company. The captain and most of the men were then assembled in the drill shed, a little distance from where we lived. When John informed them that he had come to take leave of them, perhaps to take service under another government, one and all of his companions expressed the most sincere regret that he had felt obliged to leave home and friends under such short notice; and, to their generosity be it recorded, more than one of the volunteers present offered to take his place, or rather the place of my brother Thomas, who had been drafted. But John would not hear of this; he said that he alone had the best right to go as a substitute for his brother.

It was ten o'clock at night when he returned; he found it so difficult to part with so many of his companions. All had something to say to him, and this delayed him longer than he expected. He soon donned his civilian dress and laid his uniform aside. During his absence we had talked the matter over and had agreed among ourselves not to appear much disconcerted, as it might, perhaps, have a depressing effect on my noble brother, who was to be with us but a few hours longer. What a struggle it was for us all to appear

reconciled to have him go away from us on such a mission, and every time that poor Anna Strong tried to smile that night a sigh would accompany the smile, and more than once in the midst of our forced hilarity I saw her turn aside her head to hide a tear which she would quickly brush away.

Ah me! Besides Anna Strong there was another present that night who felt a peculiar pang at the thought of parting with another very dear friend. When my brother came back from the drill shed he was accompanied by William Brightman, whom we all had known for many years; he had been the almost constant companion of my brother from boyhood, and he had now resolved to go with him and join the Federal army. He was a fine young man of kind disposition, very intelligent, the pride of his parents, and one every way esteemed. How could he be otherwise than interesting to me. If I know my own heart, he held a place in it next to my brother. I may confess it now, for the crimson avowal was often seen on my cheek in times long ago when his name was insidiously mentioned by some prying acquaintance. And how could I disbelieve him when he often and often told me that I was dearer to him than even a sister could be. I believed him, for sincerity was in his eye when he spoke, and—how I remember it!—one pleasant evening, late in the autumn, while taking a walk together along the river bank, when he asked me if I would consent to be the mistress of his new house, which was to be finished in a short time, I scarcely hesitated to accept the trust, and oh, what happiness I felt in witnessing the pleasure which my consent gave him, and in listening to his plans for the future.

What a task it is to appear happy when your heart is sad. How difficult to wear a smile and appear joyous when tears are ready to start and run down your cheeks. The season was the time when rejoicing was most general, when happy reunions took place, and when friends long separated came back, many from far distances, to spend one day together, if but one day in the year, to talk of old friends, old times and old places. We had now met, but it

was a preliminary to parting, to a parting perhaps forever. And oh, how difficult I found it now to seem cheerful, to act as if the scene were one of gladness, to go through the dance without getting astray and confusing others; but, alas, I was not the only one on that occasion who appeared to have forgotten the proper movements and to keep the right place in the quadrille, or to get so bewildered as to be unable to keep time to what sounded to me like the most melancholy music.

We danced for some hours, then we had supper: after that there were songs and duets, and then a general chorus; and John and William—the two who were about to leave us—told us humorous anecdotes and stories to make us laugh. What hollow laughter that was! and then at the height of our seeming hilarity, long before the dawn, we heard the storm outside, then the sound of sleigh bells, a sound that reached my heart like a knell—no knell could ever be more depressing—and I felt, as it were, the color steal away from my cheek when, with this, I saw Anna Strong standing, motionless as a statue, listening to the same sound with frightened look and quivering lip again, like one suddenly awakened from a pleasant dream to realize some terrible calamity.

Why was it that the jingle of the sleigh bells at that particular time caused Anna and me to look at each other with such deep meaning? I felt her hand tremble as she suddenly caught my arm. The sound of the bells on other occasions had brought pleasing excitement, and there used to be such a glad rush for fur caps, and mittens, and muffs; for shawls and cloaks, and overshoes. Now, how different! no one stirred, but for a few moments there was a solemn stillness, all as if listening to the wind and to the bells like doleful voices calling on us to prepare for a long, long separation.

The bells again gave a hasty ring as if to tell those who were to leave us to get ready and hurry up. We heard the crunch of the sleigh runners on the dry snow; the door opened and in came the teamster, wrapped and muffled, stamping on the floor as if to make all aware of his arrival. He looked around to see if his passengers were

ready. Had he been the driver of a hearse come to remove some beloved form forever from our sight, we could not have felt a greater sinking of the heart. Had we seen such a vehicle at the door, with its great black plumes, we could scarcely have had a touch of keener sorrow. How was it that those we cared for so much appeared at the moment to be so indifferent. They had already left the apartment. We could not speak a word to the man who had just come in to take them away in the darkness—for it was yet far from the dawn. There he stood on the bright hearth like some dreadful apparition—how unlike Santa Claus!—now holding his great hands over the fire, as if to hide its light from us; now stamping again and again, knocking off flakes of snow and pieces of ice on the burning logs, as if to extinguish them, and leave us to cold and discomfort, and to the unfeeling wintry blast.

Our foreboding thoughts had not time to form themselves into a definite shape before John and William came in, just ready to start. They evidently had things so arranged that they could get away without a long leave-taking. My father was already seated in the sleigh. There were but few words spoken. There was a hurried embrace—oh, how my poor mother would have clung to her son!—and out they went into the wintry gloom on that Christmas morning. The driver cracked his whip. The bells gave an ominous ring again. The sleigh started off quickly, and just then a gust laden with snow particles blew out the lamp which I held at the door, and, before it was lighted again the sound of the bells could be but faintly heard, and those upon whom our hearts were fixed had left us, perhaps forever.

CHAPTER II.

Gone!—I never felt the terrible intense meaning of that word until then. Gone, but when to return? Gone, but not on a holiday excursion at Christmas time, not on an errand of peace and good will towards fellow creatures, for it then shocked me to think of it, they had almost thoughtlessly left us to engage, if required, in actual hostilities against men towards whom they could not have had any personal grudge,

any cause for spite, much less any possible reason for such a feeling as hatred. When, if ever, would they be likely to return? If sent on to meet their so-called enemies what might not be the result? Off they went, I feel, alas, how thoughtlessly, to enter the dread arena of deadly strife just with as much indifference as if they had but started out to play a game of cricket. From what I had already heard and read of this dreadful war, I could imagine a thousand fearful things which might happen to them, as had happened to so many others, to many who had never anticipated disaster.

The grey dawn at last appeared. We sat silently around the fire, each engaged with thoughts which completely banished sleep. There was now a wild storm outside, and though we could not yet see the drifting snow-clouds we could hear their dash against the windows as they swept along. And then the almost ceaseless waving of the forest trees caused a wailing, monotonous sound like the suppressed roar of ocean waves at a distance. The lingering gloom, the rough blasts, the rushing gale, and the moaning of the woods, were the precursors of the most melancholy Christmas I ever knew.

The daylight came at last. I think we scarcely welcomed it. The deep snow-drifts on the ground, and the dull leaden sky overhead, seemed to be as cheerless as our own hearts. My poor mother was greatly downcast, and after a little time I prevailed on her to go to her room and try to rest for a few hours. Anna had been dozing for the last few minutes on the sofa. I gently laid a shawl over her, and then, after having added a little fuel to the fire, I stole away to my own apartment, and there, in the solitude of that dreadful morning, and while the wind was still turbulent outside, I could control my feelings no longer, I could not think, I could not pray, but with throbbing heart, with trembling limbs, and with grasped hands, I sat on the side of my bed and wept.

I must have slept. The house was yet quite still, as still as if the poor sorrowful souls within it were taking their last long sleep, rid at last of life's sad troubles and misfortunes. But I must be up and doing.

I heard the sound of the distant church-bell, and the jingling bells of sleigh after sleigh, as they passed along the road, reminded me of the day, a happy season to so many. But how different to us! no sound of those familiar voices, and there staring at me, as it were, was my brother's vacant seat by the fire-place.

On coming down stairs, I found Anna as I had left her. How glad I was that sleep had brought her a few hours of forgetfulness. My mother was still in her room, and I went about as quietly as I could to put things in order, and feeling that I ought to get something for mother and Anna, I laid the table for breakfast—or rather dinner, as it was now approaching noon. It was nearly two hours after this before our plain and cheerless Christmas dinner was over. We had very little appetite for anything, and merely went through the form of partaking of food for the sake, as it were, of the festive season. We had no visitors that day; everybody seemed to be away. There were family reunions, and meetings of old friends; no one came to see us, not even a sunbeam made its appearance the whole day, and then when the dismal shades of evening came again, and the night followed dark and stormy, we sat around the fire as before, thinking; thinking of what might be in the future, and communing with our melancholy thoughts.

Four days had now passed since the sad parting on Christmas morning, and no message had come from those who had left us. I called at the post office two or three times, but no letter was received. On the evening of the next day I almost clutched with beating heart two letters which were handed me. One was from John to my mother; the other was from William Brightman to myself. My mother was so nervous that I had to read the letter for her. John wrote as if in the best of spirits. Everything had, he said, been arranged. He had been readily accepted as a substitute for Thomas. He and Will. Brightman were, he said, fortunate enough to get into the same regiment, even into the same company, and they would be sent to the front together in a few days. He wrote on like one who was about to start on a pleasant trip through a peaceful country, instead

of being one to be borne off to "the front," hurried off to the battle-field, to the place of slaughter and death, to shoot down a so-called enemy, or to be shot or wounded himself. My father, he said, had taken a cold and would not return for a few days; he would of course stay to see them off.

William, too, was in the best of spirits. They were going to have a fine time. My mother nor I must not be discouraged. He would write often, and so would John, and they would be back, safe and sound, much sooner than we expected. This was the tenor of their letters just as they were on the eve of being sent with hundreds of others to "the front."

"To the front!" I never fully understood the dreadful import of these three words until then. To the front, that is to be crowded into the front ranks, in the midst of fire, smoke and thunder, and brought face to face with men arrayed against you, and then and there, in the horrid arena of carnage and confusion, be obliged to kill or mutilate fellow-beings placed before you, in order to prevent them from doing so to yourself. Terrible alternative of so-called civilization! We are told with the greatest complacency, even by moralists and philanthropists, that war has been a dire necessity all along from the beginning: the only decisive way of settling disputes among nations. In old times a personal encounter was often the usual method in which individual quarrels were settled, but common sense and the voice of public opinion have now forbidden a resort so barbarous. By means of strength, skill and overwhelming numbers, brutal force and not justice is too often triumphant. Oh, what a fearful curse war has been to the world!

I waited until I had retired to my room that night before I had courage to look at William's letter. I held it unopened in my hand for some time, guessing at its probable contents, and agitated to some degree by conflicting hopes and fears. There was, however, little in it to excite or depress. It was much in the same strain as John's letter to my mother. He had succeeded in being enrolled with him in the same regiment; they would leave together in a few days, there being but little expectation of

any further hostilities; they were in good spirits and full of hope, and did not expect to be kept very long in the army, as peace would probably be restored in a few weeks or months at furthest.

Oh, how my heart palpitated when I read his tender, delicate words to myself about our marriage, and of our future hopes and happiness; how his fondest thoughts were fixed on me, and how true and faithful he should be forever. Poor fellow! I had little reason to doubt his constant affection, but his renewed protestations were insufficient at the time to lift from my heart the weight that then oppressed it.

Anxious to know whether Anna Strong had received a letter, I called on her the next day. She, too, had heard from John, a communication no doubt similar to my own. I had a pretty good idea of what he would say to her. She seemed cheerful and more hopeful than I could be, yet I kept my thoughts to myself, and said nothing to discourage her.

In about a week after this my father returned. He said he had seen the boys off, with a great number of others who were crowded in the cars, while bands were playing and people shouting and cheering, as the long train moved out of the station for Elmira.

With tears in his eyes he spoke of this parting, and perhaps with the same foreboding thoughts that kept me so unhappy. He said that as soon as Thomas had arranged his affairs in Rochester he would come and remain with us, at least until John's return from the army.

How we watched the newspapers for the latest accounts from the seat of war! Day after day passed and the slaughter was still going on. Now it was the Confederates who had been routed after a bloody struggle; then we heard of a Federal reverse with great loss of life. Day after day passed and no letter came to lessen our apprehensions. Our suspense at this time was dreadful, and our misgivings a constant source of mental torture.

At last we had a letter. It had evidently been hurriedly written by John, in Virginia. He wrote to say that they had been greatly knocked about and hurried from place to place, and that sometimes

they were obliged to march all night without the chance of an hour's rest, often without a mouthful of food. He stated that they had already had two or three sharp skirmishes with the enemy, and had been in one severe conflict, and that the scenes of hardship, suffering and death which they had witnessed were shocking. So far William and he had escaped without a scratch, but like hundreds of others they felt dreadfully fatigued by the almost constant movement of the troops from place to place. He said that William and he had written to us previous to their removal from Elmira; but these letters never came to hand. We could afterwards account for this, as we subsequently learned, and as was commonly alleged, that letters to and from the United States and Canada were at that time opened by certain officials, in order, if possible, to detect any improper or traitorous correspondence against the government.

Days, weeks and months passed after this, and not a line was received from either of those who were so constant in our thoughts. Another whole year brought us Christmas again, and no word came from our absent ones. Scarcely a hope now remained that we should ever see them again. About a month previous to this we had heard, indirectly, that John's regiment was one of those which were engaged in the Wilderness, and that William Brightman had been badly wounded. This sad news, though uncertain, was sufficient, in our state of mind, to be accepted as almost reliable, for in our desponding condition we never expected to hear of anything but dread disaster.

Nearly every day we had heard of desperate battles, of hospitals crowded with sick and wounded, of shallow graves being hastily dug here and there, and of hundreds being tumbled into trenches without sufficient earth to cover the dead, without any memento and without any record whatever being kept of the names or condition of those who had miserably fallen. How was it possible for us to entertain the least hope, especially as we knew that both John and William—who were well aware of our anxiety concerning them—would not leave even the least opportunity pass without sending

us some kind of a communication. Their long continued silence, therefore, told its own sad story, and we believed them to be dead.

My brother Thomas was now with us, and though not very strong, took the management of our little farm, and did the best he could. My father having failed so much during the last few months, was now almost a confirmed invalid. He believed that he had lost his son, and this having preyed so strongly on his mind, brought him at times to a very low condition, leaving but little prospect of his restoration. Anna Strong's health became also very much impaired, and she was urgently advised to leave the neighborhood for a change of air and scene. She left us to visit some relations more than two hundred miles distant, and though I tried my best to appear calm at the moment of this separation, and to say a few words of hope and encouragement to her, yet how vain were my efforts; for this parting opened as it were an old wound which bled afresh; our tears mingled when we took our affecting farewell; and when this tender, amiable friend departed—is might be forever—I felt as if my cup of sorrow were nearly overflowing, and that I could never be happy again.

But this cup of affliction had yet to receive another bitter drop. In less than six months from the time that Anna went away, another terrible wee came upon us. My poor father, having lingered for some weeks fluctuating between life and death, could stay no longer. His loving heart had ceased to beat, and when he was borne away from us to his place of rest, I felt that were it not for the duty I owed to others, and the necessity of my further efforts for the benefit of my remaining parent, I would have been glad to have been laid by his side, my eyes, like his, closed in the last deep sleep.

Such thoughts were, however, useless; much, I knew; was now depending on me. The health of my brother Thomas was not very good, and not having been accustomed to hard labor—such as was necessary on newly cleared land—he could do little more than superintend work done for us, such as we could hire. Strange to say that the exertion which I and my mother had to make seemed to do us good; our thoughts

were perhaps kept from dwelling too long on one sad subject; the activities of every day life scarcely left us time for the continuous depressing thoughts which would have been enervating to body and mind. No, in the busy day time we had to attend to various matters about the place; it was at night, when all was still, that I was often and often left without healthy repose for hours while thinking of the past; and even in my troubled dreams, when they came, there was no genuine ray of hope, while at times, when the necromancer sleep brought back our absent ones, it seemed as if they had but returned to appear as shadowy forms in another leave-taking.

Ah me, what wanderings I have had alone to those spots so often frequented in other days when I had one dear friend by my side who made the world look so beautiful, who made the sternest landscape appear like a portion of paradise, and who painted the future in colors so glowing, golden and roseate. In my loneliness of heart I would many a time, when I could find a little leisure, steal away to those places where we often went together and sit thinking of the past, thinking whether he still thought of me, and then I would often be suddenly startled by the imagination that both he and my poor brother were among the slain. Still, I found much relief in visiting those retreats. The turn in a path, the moss-covered rock, the shadow of a tree, will often bring back some fond remembrance dear to the heart forever.

There was one particular spot on the top of a high hill, nearly a mile from our house, where I loved to go on quiet Sunday evenings. The summit of this elevation was shaded by a large hemlock tree—one of the original foresters—and beneath this was a large jutting rock almost covered with ferns and mosses, one side of which made a convenient seat. The view from the hill was very fine. Below lay, apparently, miles of rich plain divided by numerous fences into fields and farm boundaries. On one side were rich green pastures, dotted with sheep and grazing cattle, beyond were fields of ripening grain, next the ploughed acres, and, bounding all these, were belts of umbrageous forest trees which seemed to woo

the summer wind that at intervals reached the ear with lulling sound. From this spot, too, could be seen long lines of roads and intersecting highways; here and there a stream sparkled in the sunlight; the river with its shaded margins wound slowly along on its way to the lake beyond, which on clear calm evenings reflected in the distance all the glory of the sunset.

Ah, with what feelings I many and many a time have watched from here the red retiring orb of day sink apparently into the lake, as if to steep his heated brow in the cool crystal water; how many a time have I watched the crimson light and the fading glow, those farewell tokens of a quiet Sabbath eve! How dream-like and visionary everything relating to life would then seem, and how often and often I wished that I could forget my sorrow and take my leave of earth as gradually and peacefully as the declining beams of the setting sun which were then fading away!

While in such mood I could scarcely leave this retired place. I longed to stay. It seemed as if I were in a manner away from the world, and I sat there more than once until the deepening twilight—the shadow of departing day—almost obscured every object. I would sometimes sit there until the black wings of night were spread out wide, hiding the entire landscape, and while marking in the silence the faint lights in the scattered dwellings beneath and around me, I would fancy that I was like one who had just left the earth, but got up among the clouds waiting, as it were, for a further transition.

I had no fear at such times. I was near home and could remain up there for hours together, dealing with my reveries, and when these would flit away there would come ideas and feelings of increasing wonder when already the soft silvery sheen of another dawn would be seen—the gentle dawn of the moon-day. A faint gleam would appear above the horizon; then the underlying edge of a cloud would become a luminous fringe, then a glimmer would gradually spread over the water, revealing the gentle quivering of the bosom of the lake, then the placid queen of night would slowly ascend, shedding a mild glory over the whole scene, making the beautiful earth

appear as the peaceful portal of heaven itself. Oh, how exquisite! I could gaze here until midnight, and it was often with reluctance I had to leave such a sight and take my steps homeward and alone!

CHAPTER III.

We often heard from Anna Strong: she generally wrote to me. We had not seen her for nearly three years. Latterly her health was rather worse, and she had to remain confined as an invalid most of the time. From all we could learn we had very little hope that she would ever get better. Poor Anna! I but too well knew the cause of her drooping—the flower was slowly withering; there was a worm gnawing at her heart, which would pierce it through and through. After a period of some months from the time she last wrote—an unusual delay on her part—another letter came. She wrote to tell us that she had a strange visitor. A poor old mutilated war-worn soldier or pensioner, whose broken health scarcely left him an expectation of a much longer stay in this world, had called at the house one cold, dreary evening, and enquired for her. After having been invited to enter he hobbled in, breathing hard from the little exertion he had made, and though his condition was pitiful, he looked at her for some moments and seemed to be affected by her emaciated appearance. In consequence of a severe wound in the mouth and jaw his utterance was difficult, and it was hard to make out his words or understand his meaning.

After some time, however, she gathered from what he tried to say that he had been well acquainted with my poor brother John, and also with William Brightman. He had been in the same regiment with them and had fought along with them in the battles of the Wilderness in Virginia. John, he said, had been desperately wounded, and as for William Brightman, he had, alas, received more than one mortal wound and died on the field. He said that he was with the poor fellow in his dying moments and received his last message, which was, that if he was ever able he should call on me and place in my hands his (William's) watch, as a token of his fond remembrance.

As for John, he said, he had been taken to the hospital in an unconscious state, and for many months his recovery was considered doubtful. He said he knew that if John ever got able to travel he would return home, if but to die among his friends.

She told us much more of what the old soldier had to communicate. He had called on her first, as she was in the way of his line of travel. He had heard of her from William: and as soon as he had rested and gained a little more strength, he intended to visit us also and deliver me William's watch; the token which he had received for me from his dying comrade. Anna also stated that the poor man's sad story had so overcome her that she had to weep in his presence. Her friends, full of sympathy for the old soldier, would not let him depart then, but insisted on his remaining with them for a time until he got better able to travel. She said he had been with them now nearly a week, and that she would have written sooner were it not that she had been so overcome by the appearance of this visitor and his mournful tale as to leave her for some days unable to write a word.

It must have been three weeks from the time I read that terrible letter before I was able to leave my bed. My mother afterwards told me that I had read the letter through to the end; that then it had dropped from my hand, and that I looked or rather stared at her with an expression of face so woeful as to cause her to imagine the worst concerning my mental condition. Up to the time of my reading that letter, I felt almost positive that both John and William were lost to us forever. But yet, when the blow came, when the dreadful assurance was certain, when the last lingering hope was banished, I must have given way, for I know nothing of what followed. An affection of the brain deprived me of all sense, leaving me utterly prostrate, and for more than two weeks I remained in this condition—happily without the recurrence, even in a dream, of the calamitous news—and at the end of that period, when my reason was gradually restored, the fearful truth came back to afflict me in another manner, giving my dear mother but little hope that I should ever leave my room alive. The

necessities of our condition required, however, that I should make an effort, even while I was in a weak state, to assist my mother in our household duties. There was work to be done, and I must help to do it; we could not afford to pay for the assistance we needed. As it was, the payment of doctors' bills and for such aids as we were obliged to get during my sickness, left our resources very low.

Another month passed and I was almost restored again. I knew not how it was, but believing that the future had no happiness in store for me, I managed to cultivate a feeling of resignation, and went through my daily routine of duties with a placid mind, though bereft of an aspiration for anything beyond that which now seemed allotted to me. I felt quite submissive, a burden of care and sorrow had been laid on me—were there not thousands in the same condition—I cared but little for future consequences. I did not desire to live; I did not wish to die. I simply knew that others were, to a certain extent, depending on me, and out of my love and regard for them I went mechanically as it were, and did what I could at home, ready and willing to lie down and rest when my time came.

About the annual return of Christmas I always felt a recurrence of increased sadness. Whenever Christmas came it always brought back a revival of that parting scene from my brother, and my dearest friend, never to be forgotten. Since that time, Christmas has ever been to us a season for silent sorrow instead of rejoicing. At such periods, instead of being together, we generally separated and sat somewhere alone, as if each was desirous of hiding from all others the painful and depressing thoughts which were then sure to be uppermost in our minds.

It was Christmas Eve again. The day was unusually fine; as soft and warm almost as a day in June. The air was clear and mild. There had already been frost and snow, but these had disappeared for some days. Many were disappointed for there would be no Christmas sleigh rides. In fact it seemed as if winter had taken an early leave, desirous of permitting the virgin spring to bring garlands of real flowers to decorate Christmas trees instead

of the artificial ones so often used. As it was, wild flowers could be found here and there in certain spots, and laughing children could be seen gathering little bunches of these, delighted with their occupation.

Early in the afternoon of that day I left the house again, and took my way thoughtfully along until I reached my favorite rock-seat on the hill. I had not been there for some time, and I found this place of retirement now very enjoyable. I was followed as usual by Carlo, our trusty dog, who, in his delight, kept running backwards and forwards and up and down the hill while I toiled rather slowly to the summit. I was never more charmed with the scene from this elevation than I was at that time. The air was balmy and refreshing, and there was a quietude which was most soothing. Not a sound could be heard save at times the shouting of boys at play; their light hearts knew nothing of sorrow. Most of them were no doubt anticipating presents from Santa Claus on the morrow; and for days past children had been talking of that quaint little visitor, and watching for his return, as if they soon expected to see him in his furs and vehicle coursing down to them on a moonbeam.

I had sat there for some hours thinking mostly of the past, as usual, and was preparing to leave for home, when I heard shouting again, and on looking down I saw a number of little boys run across a field towards the road, for something new had attracted their attention. I watched in that direction and saw an apparently old man on the road below, which ran close to the foot of the hill. He was bent and used a crutch. I noticed that he had but one leg, and he went along very slowly. He must have got off the stage at the near cross-roads tavern, or it might be he had come from there. He wore a broad brimmed hat and a long grey coat, and he had a large bundle strapped on his back, which led me to think he was a pedlar. Some of the younger boys may have thought that he was the veritable Santa Claus himself. Indeed, at this particular season he might be taken by the children to be the effigy of that mythical individual. The older boys went close to him, but I noticed that several of the little lads kept back, as if afraid to venture nearer. The

old man stopped to rest, and was evidently making some enquiries, and then, when I saw two or three of the boys point directly towards our house, it immediately struck me that this was likely Anna Strong's visitor on his way to see us. Deciding to go down and meet him I started at once and got to where he stood looking about him like one pleased with the beautiful landscape spread around. Carlo barked at the stranger before we overtook him, but when the man heard the dog he looked at him for a moment or two, gave a low whistle, and patted him on the head, and Carlo, though rather shy towards strangers, wagged his tail, became quite subdued as if in sympathy with the infirm old man, and followed close after him as we went along.

Ah me, what a wreck was this poor creature! This, I thought, is no doubt the old wounded soldier that Anna said would visit us. She had not exaggerated in describing his appearance. To say he was a poor broken soldier would give but a frail idea of what he really was. He had but one leg and one eye, and his left hand was turned inwards, having stiffened in that direction in consequence of a severe wound. His jaw had evidently been broken, his mouth someway torn and distorted, and one side of his face was blackened and disfigured as if a whole charge of powder had entered and lodged there, destroying also his eye.

When we met he looked at me intently for some moments, and then without saying a word, or asking my name, he handed me a few lines written by Anna. She informed me that the bearer was the person who had been with them for some time, that as his health had improved a little he had decided on paying his promised visit so as to be with us on Christmas. On reading the note I grasped his hand and told him who I was—that I was John's sister, and poor William Brightman's friend. He said nothing, but when I had done speaking he bent his head, I heard him sigh, and, while leaning on his crutch, he raised his wounded hand to cover his face, evidently affected with pity for me. Poor fellow, he had of course heard something of my history, he knew that I had a great sorrow—but what might not his have been? and how much more than I was he to be pitied, mutilated and disfigured as he

was, and with griefs and heartrending cares and sorrows perhaps far greater than mine.

Ah, how I from my soul felt for him while he still stood bent and silent before me! It was some minutes until he seemed willing to leave the spot. He had not yet spoken a word. I was aware of his impediment of speech, and when I told him that I should carry his bundle, for I was more able to bear it than he was, he made no resistance. I unstrapped it, and placing it on my shoulder we went on at a slow pace thoughtfully together. The walk was evidently too much for him, as he appeared to get fatigued before we reached the house. Though scarcely a mile, it had taken us nearly an hour—an hour without a word having been spoken to me by the stranger, yet I observed that he looked at me very often, as if desirous of saying something. Still, on we went in silence, and I saw the last rays of the setting sun sinking behind the hill just as we entered our doorway.

When we got inside he stood like one irresolute whether to take another step in advance. He looked from side to side, then up at the ceiling, then down at the floor. Then his eyes seemed to wander around, scanning every object as if he were for the moment lost or confused. The house was very quiet. My brother was out, and my mother sat sleeping in her rocking chair before the smouldering fire in the next apartment. The fading ray of the sunset rested on her face and glistened in her spectacles, which had partly dropped from her closed eyes. The favorite cat—the little Maltese which my brother John had brought to her about a week previous to the time he left us forever—was rolled up asleep in her lap. This picture of domestic peace must have greatly affected the stranger. He stood gazing on the object of veneration before him, and he appeared to be afraid to make the least noise lest it should disturb or awaken my mother. I was going to arouse her gently, when he motioned me back and managed to whisper, "Let her be." These were his first words to me.

The scene before him had perhaps reminded the poor soldier of his own home and his own mother, and when I saw a tear run down his cheek, I understood his feelings. I wished to see him seated, and I placed a

chair noiselessly beside him. He quietly took the offered seat, and removed his hat. I then noticed that he had a large scar running from the top of his head towards his forehead, and that the hair on the sides of this cut had for some distance become grey, giving him an older and more worn appearance than was really due to his years. He bent his head again, and I heard another sigh, and then I heard his suppressed sob, and another, and another. What must his emotions have been at the moment, led as he was to think, most likely, of a lost mother, of a lost home, and of kindred and friends lost to him forever.

Just then my brother Thomas entered. The stranger turned towards him, and when he saw Thomas he dropped his head again, and held out his hand, which my brother grasped as if he were some old friend. I sat close to our visitor on the other side. Weak and overcome as he was, he leant upon my shoulder, and while he was in this position he trembled, his sighs became quicker, and unable to restrain himself any longer, he wept aloud.

My mother awoke; for a few moments she seemed bewildered. She did not move, but remained seated in her chair. She looked from me to my brother, and then at me again, as if waiting for some explanation of the unusual scene before her. Our strange friend was still weeping, with bent head; but when he raised his pleading, pitiful face, covered with wounds and tears, and looked at her with outstretched arms, she suddenly started up, raised her hands above her head, ran towards him, stared at him wildly for a moment, fell on her knees, grasped him in her arms, and then cried out, "O God, my son, my son! O God, my son!"

It was her son. While our dear brother remained quite unknown to us—even to Anna Strong during the weeks he stayed where she was—the maternal instinct penetrated the mournful disguise of his wounds and revealed him to her, to his mother, almost instantly.

It was several days after this before he was able to give us in his imperfect way a history of his life since he left us. The hardships and privations which he had endured were dreadful. As his utterance

was very difficult it was hard to find out the import of his words, and the effort he was obliged to use to make himself understood was, in his feeble condition, at times rather exhausting. I listened with a kind of dread composure while he told us of the fate of William Brightman—of him who had won my woman's early affection—now lost to me forever. I received from his hand William's watch—his last token to me—and even now I sometimes wonder how reason remains unimpaired while I stand in imagination by the side of the grave—a grave now unknown—into which he was lowered from the field of carnage. Great heavens! think of the madness of men to engage in mutual butchery. O war, with bloody hand, what a curse thou hast been to humanity! Many of the bravest and best have been excited by thy fiendish clamor and deluded by thy garish pomp to destruction. When will rulers and statesmen have sufficient moral courage to decline the arbitrament of the sword? When will preachers of peace throughout the world proclaim more loudly the brotherhood of man, denounce the estrangement caused by nationality, and cease to invoke the god of battles? Alas, so far, many of the influential have been too ready to side with some armed champion and proclaim naval and military glory as little less than the glory of heaven itself.

In spite of all that the most constant and tender affection could do, my poor brother John remained with us but a few months. He had no desire to live as a confirmed invalid, and as he evidently felt that life had no attractions for him, and that he would be only a burden on others, he wished for his release. Ah how willingly we would have borne that burden, and how comforting it would have been to us to wait on him and if possible ease his affliction. He left us! His chair by our fireside is vacant, his voice is no longer heard, and he comes to us only in our dreams. From where I now sit I can see his grave on the hillside, and often at night I can see a moonbeam linger on the white marble slab that marks his resting place. Ah, could I but kneel and drop my tears on that other grave, which alas, like so many on the battle field, must forever remain unknown.

In a distant cemetery there is another sleeper, another fond heart stilled in death. That true woman, Anna Strong, when she discovered how she had failed to recognize the one who was dearest to her of all on earth, was greatly pained, and when she heard of his death she soon followed him—How I wish they may meet again!

The church bells are now silent, but a hundred sleigh bells are heard around, and people who have been at worship or elsewhere are now on their way to meet friends and relations in happy homes at this festive season. Ah, the sad, sad memories which the day brings: it can never more be but a day of gloom to us. The wind still courses outside, and the wintry storm raises its voice. The pine trees bend and the snow-

clouds whirl along in a wild chase down the highway; but even in the tumult I hear a little whispering voice—a sound that recalls the voice of one silent in death—the gentle tick, tick, of *his* watch which I hold at my ear—a voice which reminds me that time is passing away, that grey hairs have already come, and that my heart pulsating now like and ticking of this watch must soon cease its throbbing forever. O War, War, what deep, deep sorrow thou hast brought me! there is no more Christmas for me in the future. Thou hast darkened my path: thou hast left me without a hope, and I must go on my lonely, dreary way to the end with a widowed heart.

THE END.

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